



Story and Photos by SSG Alberto Betancourt



▲ PV2 Jessie Travis of Company A, 2nd Battalion, 187th Infantry, scans for suspicious activity from his fighting position inside the airfield's perimeter.

**P**V2 Chris Abata has been in the Army just over six months. He'd recently gotten married, but in January found himself living in a hole in the ground approximately 8,000 miles away from his wife and friends in Erie, Pa.

Abata, a member of the Mortar Platoon, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, is one of more than 2,000 soldiers from the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, supporting Operation Enduring Freedom in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

"I feel like the rest of our nation feels after what happened Sept. 11," Abata said. "I miss my wife, but I'm glad I'm here doing my part to end terrorism."

COL Frank Wiercinski, Task Force Rakkasans' (3rd BCT) commander, said the average age of his soldiers is 21 years. He said many of them have never been out of the United States before and are now in a country devastated by years of war.

"They see this is a dangerous place the moment they touch the ground," he said. "Some of these soldiers witnessed a firefight inside our perimeter as they were getting off the plane."

▲ The 3rd Brigade Combat Team of the 101st Airborne Division is responsible for securing Afghanistan's war-battered Kandahar International Airport.



▲ For members of the Scout Platoon, 2nd Battalion, 197th Infantry Regiment, "home" in Kandahar is a damaged building within the airfield's perimeter.

He said Afghanistan is a combat zone and in that zone it's not whether you've been in combat before that makes you good — it's the training you receive that makes you good in combat.

"These soldiers have had superb training through our normal training cycles, but since Sept. 11 we ratcheted

it up a bit," he said. "The president ordered us to get ready and that's exactly what the Rakkasans did."

Wiercinski felt that his full-spectrum brigade was the "right choice" in the transfer of authority between the Marines and the Army, a transition he described as "smooth and seamless."

"We were very systematic and extremely sequential during the transfer of authority," he said. "We're in a combat zone where inefficiency can become extremely dangerous."

A full-spectrum brigade has offensive capabilities during combat but can quickly adapt to any developing situation, from security operations all the way down to humanitarian missions.



▶ PV2 Jessie Travis stays inside his fighting position on the north side of the airfield while his "battle buddy," PV2 Jeremy Paz, fills sandbags.



▲ Members of the anti-Taliban forces peer at soldiers manning an observation post outside the airfield.



▲ CPT Matthew Donald (left), commander of the 108th MP Co., talks to CPL Jason Johnson and SPC Natasha Nelson outside the detainee facility.



▶ Members of the anti-Taliban forces pass the time watching activities near the "South Tower" OP.



▲ Scout Platoon member SGT Jacob Anderson prepares a meal inside the sniper tower inside the airfield's perimeter.

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SPC Scott Whitlock of HHC, 2nd Bn., 187th Inf., keeps an eye on activities surrounding the "north tower" OP.

from the blustering cold winds and the desert's nonstop dust waves.

"It looks like we're going to be here a while so I might as well make it feel like home," he said of the 7-by-10-foot, sandbag-enclosed pit. "I signed up to do this — that's why I'm here doing my job."

Like Abata, PV2 John Quaid was doing his job. The scout from Centralia, Wash., occupied an observation post overlooking an Afghan village.

Quaid and the rest of his 2nd Bn. team lived high above the ground at the south tower, the OP farthest from Kanadhar's airport. Besides the village, the view from the tower includes a decaying Russian-built barracks — a reminder of the Soviet Union's 10-year war in Afghanistan. The soldiers could also see a minefield approximately 500 meters away. Also assigned to the tower



SPC Scott Fleckenstein of Co. C, 2nd Bn., 187th Inf., carefully searches an Afghan's belongings before allowing him through the airport gate.

were members of the Anti-Taliban forces, a group of AK-47-toting Afghans who guarded the airfield's perimeter.

"Working with the Afghans is challenging," Quaid said. "We don't understand them, and we don't know if our interpreter is really telling us everything they say."

Although butterflies still occasionally swarmed in his stomach, he said he felt secure knowing his team was watching his back.

"I'm very proud to be doing my part for my country," Quaid said. "I'm properly trained to do what I'm doing."

Wiercinski said the mission in Afghanistan will continue until the president says it's complete.

"I deployed here with a certain number of soldiers, I intend to take the same number of soldiers back home safely," he said. □

"Our brigade combat team is very powerful," he said. "We bring combined arms to the fight. We also have support personnel, medical and aviation. We have the right combination for full-spectrum capabilities."

Force protection, the security of the Kandahar international airport, and logistics are a priority for Wiercinski.

"This airfield is extremely important," he said. "It brings in continued Air Force supply and resupply. Holding this airfield and ensuring everyone here is safe and secure is my primary job."

Meanwhile, back at his fighting position almost half a mile from the airport terminal where the majority of the task force lived in tents, Abata was making curtains out of polypropylene bags for his bunker, to protect him

PV2 John Quaid, also of HHC, 2nd Bn., uses his sniper rifle's telescopic sight to check on movement in an Afghan village near his OP.



## MPs in Afghanistan

SINCE Jan. 1, soldiers of the Fort Polk, La.-based 519th Military Police Battalion have been ensuring that the detainee facility at Afghanistan's Kandahar International Airport is secure and the detainees needs are met.

"We've had challenges, not only with the detainee facility, but also with building up this base camp despite the difficulty of getting materials here," said battalion commander LTC Keith Warman. "We've prioritized what had to come in immediately and

so far all the challenges have been met, both for the care of the soldiers and the detainees."

Besides soldiers from Fort Polk, the battalion is supported by MPs from the 65th and 108th MP companies from Fort Bragg, N.C.

"This is a great opportunity for the MP corps," said Warman. "This will be part of our nation's history."

Warman is "warden" of the detainee facility, better known locally as "Yankee Stadium" because of the towering floodlights surrounding the compound. He said it's his responsibility to ensure the detainee population is under control.

"Our soldiers feed and provide medical attention to the detainees," he said. "We're giving them the best quality of life possible

under these conditions. We must also keep them secure — not only among themselves but from the guard forces protecting them."

Besides the detainee facility, the MPs also work security at the main gate.

"We supervise the searching of local Afghans selected to work inside the compound," said CPT Matthew Donald, commander of the 108th MP Co. "We make sure nothing enters the perimeter that can be used as a weapon or for gathering intelligence on the set-up of the compound."

Donald said the MPs work 12-hour shifts guarding the detainee facility.

SPC Natasha Nelson has been in the Army only two years, but already is a seasoned veteran. She served six months in Kosovo and said Afghanistan is her second "real-world" mission.

"I hate the reason we're here, but I signed on to protect my country and that's what I'm here to do," she said.

Nelson said her family is very proud of her and supports her mission in Afghanistan 100 percent.

"I'm looking forward to the gym equipment showing up so I can beef-up again," she said.

CPL Jason Johnson works inside the facility as a guard.

"At first it was awkward being around all the detainees," he said. "But I got used to it."

The Texas native said he's very proud to be supporting Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

"This is a great mission for us," he said. "It gives us the opportunity to employ the training we've received for a combat environment like this one in Afghanistan." — SSG Alberto Betancourt



Soldiers from the 519th MP Bn. and 2nd Bn., 187th Inf., monitor the front gate of the airfield as Afghans wait their turn to be searched before entering.



SPC Rickey Currie of the 187th Inf. watches carefully as PFC John Cullinan searches an Afghan before allowing him onto the airport grounds.